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SUBJECT: REPORTERS NOT AS WELCOME IN KOREAN MINISTRIES

SUMMARY

¶1. (U) On May 22, Korea's cabinet passed new rules that will, unless opposition from the media and many members of the National Assembly proves too strong, dramatically alter the current structure of press rooms at most ministry offices. Under the new press policy, which could be implemented immediately, the existing 37 press rooms in government administrative offices will be consolidated into "combined briefing rooms" in three government complexes in central Seoul, Gwacheon and Daejeon. The new rules will ban journalists from being stationed in any government offices; they will instead be offered temporary press cards to attend news briefings. Reporters will have to rely more heavily on personal contacts within the government to get clarification on news stories as opposed to the current method of approaching officials directly in the halls of the ministries. President Roh characterized the new policy as a way to modernize the press corps and bring it more closely in line with other countries' standards while the press cried censorship and infringement of its constitutional rights. (NOTE: The Blue House press room and several others will remain unchanged. MOFAT's press room will be affected by the change. END NOTE.). End Summary.

SOURCE OF DISCORD

¶2. (SBU) In March, President Roh ordered a study of press briefing systems around the world. "A handful of reporters just sit around press rooms and collude, setting the agenda on how articles should be written," Roh said at the time the order was issued. The order came shortly after Roh's national health plan was widely criticized in the media as a ploy to garner support in an election year. Most people agree that there are problems with the Korean press, although there is less agreement on the nature and solution to the problems. In a war against the conservative major press -- often critical of Roh's "radical" policies -- the president has been trying to give more power to the so-called "minor" media journalists, including more progressive internet media outlets. After the initial flurry of complaints appeared in the press, Roh challenged the media to a public debate on the issue, which took place on June 17. Although it was anticipated as a showdown between Roh and the conservative

media, the attendees were not a representative gathering. Roh commented during the two-hour televised debate that, "The journalists were wrongly chosen. You all come from well-behaved organizations."

NEW PRESS POLICY

¶3. (SBU) The results of Roh's study of other countries' press rooms were announced on May 22 in the form of a new press policy that includes shutting of 37 press rooms in government ministries, to be replaced by "combined briefing rooms" in three government complexes in central Seoul, Gwacheon and Daejeon. Journalists, instead of having offices in the buildings, will be offered temporary press cards to attend news briefings. Reporters will have to rely more heavily on personal contacts within the government to get clarification on news stories as opposed to the current method of strolling around government ministries and questioning officials they meet.

¶4. (SBU) The agency responsible for the new policy, the Government Information Agency (GIA), was unapologetic about the new policy. Ahn Young-bae, Deputy Director of the agency, denied any connection between the current actions and those taken against the media during the repressive Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-wan regimes. Referring to the critical headlines generated by the policy, Ahn said, "At least we did not gag the press. Journalists will be inconvenienced by losing their desks at the ministries. I expect that journalists will have to run around more, but their articles will include more viewpoints while relying less on government-fed information." Ahn said that the measures would make for better reporters.

¶5. (U) Anecdotally, it is said that Roh changed the structure of the Blue House press office after viewing the U.S. television drama, The West Wing, where the press is often shown as tightly controlled and with limited access to the White House.

MEDIA RESPONSE

¶6. (SBU) The Korean press responded quickly by publishing negative headlines about the perceived limitations on their constitutional right to information. Legal groups led by human rights lawyers are planning to file a claim against the government naming the public, journalists and media groups as co-claimants. Journalists also raised the concern that higher-ranking officials were refusing contact with reporters, implying that a wall was being built up between the government and the media.

¶7. (SBU) From the foreign media perspective, Associated Press journalist Bert Herman told us that he did not like the old system as it effectively shut out Western and foreign media from the "special" briefing sessions and from the use of the press rooms. Under the new policy, Herman said that he was told foreign journalists will have the same access as local journalists. While Herman was skeptical of the claim, he said that any change to the press policy offered the possibility of improvement over the old system.

¶8. (SBU) According to Media Today, up to 85.7 percent of managing editors in 18 local media outlets are opposed to the new plan. About 43 percent believe the previous press system will be restored as soon as the Roh government moves out after the December presidential election.

POLITICIANS' RESPONSE

¶9. (SBU) Opposition Party GNP Chairman, Kang Jae-sup,

quickly weighed in on behalf of his party to say they will fight the change. "The party will do its best to invalidate the new measure within the June National Assembly session after examining its legal and institutional injustice. The government will not succeed in its attempt to cover up its misgoverning by closing down press rooms." Both of the leading GNP presidential candidates, Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, spoke out in opposition to the plan. Lee went so far as to say if he were elected, he would reopen the press rooms.

¶10. (SBU) Even the ruling Uri Party spokesman, Choi Jae-sung, expressed his party's concern with the rules in the following statement: "The government should think this over before making a decision. We formally urge the government to put the idea on hold." (NOTE: If the Uri Party decides to withhold support, the plan will effectively come up against unanimous opposition in the National Assembly as all other parties have already declared they are against the scheme. Even so, the executive branch can still implement the new rule. END NOTE.).

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) It is no secret that Roh has a strained relationship with the press and would like to cramp their style somewhat. At the same time, Korea's media currently enjoys amazing access to ministries and officials. Embassy officers often meet journalists not just in the lobbies of ministries, but wandering the halls with apparent easy access to senior officials. Not surprisingly, ostensibly internal government information leaks, and quickly. Hence, the limitations on journalists' access to government ministries should not be seen as trampling on freedom of the press -- which Korea enjoys in abundance -- but as an effort to put in place boundaries that are common in the U.S. and elsewhere. Although access to the briefing sessions will be more tightly controlled, there are no indications that the briefings will be any less forthcoming.
VERSHBOW